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CROP PRODUCTION CLUBS

The Final Report of the Study to Determine The Role of Production Clubs and Associations in The Technology Transfer Process

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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THE FINAL REPORT OF THE STUDY TO DETERMINE THE ROLE OF PRODUCTION CLUBS AND ASSOCIATIONS IN THE TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER PROCESS.

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Abstract

Crop production clubs are relatively new in Saskatchewan. They have been formed for a variety of reasons, all of which relate to some aspect of improving crop production. Many started for the purpose of maximizing yield but more recently the club members have become more concerned with economic yields, conservation and marketing.

Many commonalities existed in all of the clubs. Membership was small, usually 10 to 15 in number, were innovative farmers who were eager to try new agronomic practices which could lead to better cropping practices. Clubs were most successful when there was strong leadership from within, but strong support from professional agrologists was also important. Clubs must have a clear operating plan, internal structure and member commitment to continue to function.

The study found that crop production clubs make an important contribution in the agricultural technology transfer process.

Summary

The concept of a crop production club is not new. It has been a means of providing information and educational experience in Agricultural Societies, 4-H, pedigreed seed production and garden projects for nearly as long as the province of Saskatchewan has existed. There has been however a renewed interest in production clubs in the past few years. This interest has been generated in several ways. In some instances a chemical representative has organized a group of producers for the purpose of demonstrating improved yields using more intensive cropping systems. In other cases a group of producers has organized to try various production techniques of interest. In most cases the first clubs organized to determine how to improve or maximize yields. More recently clubs have focused more on the economical aspects of production and a large number have included a strong emphasis on soil conservation and marketing.

Specific goals and objectives varied widely from club to club given location, interest of membership, involvement with outside professionals and length of operation. There are, however, many commonalities which exist in

successful crop production clubs. First and foremost the club must have a clear operating plan that is well thought out and clearly understood and supported by its membership. As well the club must have a structured method of operation to facilitate decisions, to improve meetings and to prepare and present reports. Professional agrologists are also a vital part of success, not as leaders but as advisors, resource people and in some cases as technical assistants.

The need for financial sources varies. Some clubs because of rather ambitions projects require large budgets while others rely on membership fees with members providing extra funds when needed.
Membership is usually small averaging 10 to 15 members. Those who do belong do so because they are innovative, highly committed and interested in new ideas and practices. They see the productions club as a means to improve their own enterprise. While they do not see themselves as focusing on the transfer of technology directly, they are very willing to provide information and allow visits to their farms. This process facilitates adoption diffusion in technology transfer process. Because crop production club members tend to be innovative farmers, they provide an opportunity to test new cropping practises on a field scale level. This intern provides a demonstration system for other produces in the province. While most of the crop production clubs in Saskatchewan are relatively new, they will have an impact on provincial agriculture.

1. Background and Objectives

1.1. Reason for the Study

Early in 1988 a meeting attended by representatives from the Economics Branch, Soils and Crops Branch and Extension Branch from Saskatchewan Agriculture was held to discuss production clubs. The professionals at the meeting decided that more information was needed. The decision was made to initiate a study of crop production clubs to determine why farmers join, the internal characteristics which give strength or which cause problems, and to determine what role such groups can play in the technology transfer process in the agriculture system in Saskatchewan.

1.2 Objectives

The survey form was designed to obtain the following information:

1. How the club was started
2. Goals/Objectives of the club
3. Structure
4. Decision making process
5. Role of the professional (as perceived by the producer and as perceived by the professional)
6. Activities undertaken
7. Funding sources
8. Number of members
9. Impact on members (as viewed by members and as viewed by professionals)
10. Impact on non members (as identified by members and by professionals)
11. Overall rating of the club in relation to: success in meeting its goals, usefulness as a technology transfer process, and likelihood of continuing to operate.
12. Factors important for a successful crop production club (as identified by members and by professionals).

2. Experimental Methods

All Ag Reps in Saskatchewan were contacted to determine how many crop production clubs existed and to identify key producers who were active in the clubs. A survey form was then developed. This was used as a guideline to facilitate interviews with club members, public agrologists who work with clubs and industry representatives from the private sector. These interviews were conducted during October and November 1988.

The procedure followed was to set up interviews with the producers identified by the Ag Reps. When these producers were interviewed, they were asked to identify the professional agrologist who was most influential in relation to that particular crop production club. That person was then interviewed. The professionals included agrologists, industry reps and organizational representatives.

There were twenty crop production clubs identified and thirty-five interviews were conducted with producers, agrologists and industry representatives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 How Clubs Are Started

Eight of the clubs were started by industry representatives. These included fertilizer dealers, grain company representatives and chemical company representatives.
Six began because of the interest and initiative of a few farmers in a local area.
Five were formed by Ag Reps.
One was started by an Agricultural Society although this may have been as a result of a few interested farmers in that organization who initiated the sponsorship.

3.2 Goals/Objectives of the Clubs

As one would expect the stated goals of the crop production clubs varied a great deal. It is difficult to summarize all of the goals stated. There were some categories that seemed to be more often identified. The following list provides a summary:

—to improve yields
—to learn about new crops
—to improve the economics of crop production
—to test recommendations in a local area
—to improve soil quality
—to implement conservation practices
—to determine the best fertilizer/chemical programs.
—to test various machinery
—to obtain outside resources
—to learn more about marketing

3.3 Structure

The study attempted to determine how structured the clubs were in relation to their operating procedures. Nineteen out of the 20 indicated that they operated in a formalized manner. This would include elections, keeping minutes and records of meetings, financial statements and decisions by voting. Most of those interviewed felt that this was important. Most indicated that they perceived their production club to be a "business club" rather than a "social club".

3.4 Decision Making Process

There was an overwhelming belief that the decisions made within the club were made by club members and not by the professionals or industry reps. All those interviewed felt very strongly about this. In most instances decisions were made by a voting procedure although some interviewed mentioned that consensus was occasionally used. In some instances there were opportunities for individual decisions relating to projects.

3.5 Role of the Professional

The producers interviewed indicated that professionals played an important and valuable role in their club. They indicated that the professionals provided a lot of leadership and were able to help by locating resources for the club. They helped the club by providing technical advice on various projects. They were also credited with providing help to get the clubs organized in the first place. Even those clubs that were instigated by farmers had a lot of support from the Ag Rep or an industry representative.

The professionals interviewed indicated that they believed their role was more of an advisor and consultant rather than being a leader. They also felt that they played an important role in the organizational process to help the club get started.

Based on the interviews it would be difficult to draw too many specific conclusions as to the role of the professional. It seems to vary from club to club and from individual to individual.

3.6 Types of Activities

The twenty crop production clubs varied greatly in terms of the activities and projects carried out. Some tended to focus on a particular aspect of production while others carried out a variety of projects. When asked specifically to indicate their focus 11 said they believed their club focused on a wide range of activity while 9 said their club was quite narrowly focused. While it would be difficult to prove any significance, there seemed to be an indication that those clubs started by an industry representative tended to have a narrow range of projects. It is interesting to note that in only one case did the producer and professional disagree as to the focus of the club. The producer felt the club had a wide variety of projects while the industry representative felt that the club had a narrow focus. It should be noted that these were of perception and not intended to be evaluative.

3.7 Funding Sources

A large number of the clubs received outside funding at one time or another. Sources of funds came from ADF, PFRA, industry, Grow with Canola and the SOS program. Five clubs by choice did not seek outside funds. There seemed to be a great variance in the need for funding. Some had very low budgets and the members contributed what was needed. One club had a budget of up to $100,000 and received funding from a number of sources. All clubs had membership fees ranging from $10.00 to $100.00.

3.8 Memberships

All of the people who were interviewed were adamant in their belief that the membership should remain small. The range in total members in the clubs was from 6 to 22 and the mean was 13.5. Eighteen of the clubs restrict membership. When asked to comment on membership the individuals interviewed were consistent in their remarks.

—"Small numbers make it easier to hold meetings and plan projects".
—"Fewer members allow for better discussions".
—"Restricted membership allows for the most committed farmers to belong."
—"Keeps out the BS'ers!"
—"Only the highly motivated are likely to join."

It was clear in this study that those farmers who belonged to production clubs tended to be the innovative, motivated and fairly secure type of farmer. While the study didn't specifically ask for demographic information it appears that the members were generally in the 30 to 40 year old range, were quite well educated and had a sound farm enterprise. One individual interviewed indicated that they made a decision to keep the "old guys" out of their club!

4 Conclusions and Impact

4.1 Impact on Members of the Crop Club

The producers indicated a number of reasons for belonging to a crop club. Rather than listing all of the reasons, some general observations can be made. First of all producers did not see their crop club as being a social club. The felt that they obtained a lot of information which they could use on their own farms to improve their own enterprise. It appeared that club members tended to think of the crop club as existing for its members. They rarely indicated that they felt it had any responsibility to the larger community. This is not to say that they would not share their information. Indeed they welcomed visitors and tours if these were arranged. Many also felt that the group support allowed them to try various projects that they would not normally try as an individual. As well many indicated that it was easier to get resources (both financial and people) if a club existed.
The agrologists and industry people interviewed tended to support these observations. In addition, however, they indicated that members in the crop club tended to "grow" as individuals both in their own enterprise and also as community leaders. They felt the group support is very important and creates more innovativeness among the club members. They also indicated that better records of crop production were kept and because several members attempted the same project in a controlled manner, the results were more representative of the area. An interesting observation was that in a year such as 1988, the group support was very important in terms of moral support. Club members tended to be less frustrated even though their results were poor.

4.2 Impact on Non Members

Because most of the crop clubs had been operating for only one or two years, it is difficult to determine how much impact they have had on those who farm nearby but who are not members. This was evident in the interviews with the club members. They did indicate however, that there was quite a lot of "over the fence" discussion especially if there was an obvious situation (either good or bad!) As well they felt that more of their neighbours were showing interest in the projects being carried out. A few examples were given where neighbours had tried something done previously by the crop club members. The professionals agreed that there was an increase in interest among non-members. They felt that given time, crop clubs would prove to be useful in the adoption diffusion process in technology transfer. They agreed that it is too early to do any impact evaluation.

4.3 Overall Rating of the Clubs

The members and professionals were asked to rate the crop club that they were identified with in three categories. The following table lists their responses:

Table I — Overall Rating of Crop Production Clubs

Category	Member	Professional
Success in meeting goals	3.2	3.7
Usefulness in technology transfer	4.1	4.1
Likelihood of continuing in the future	3.5	3.9

*This is the mean score on a five point rating scale as follows

1	2	3	4	5
poor	fair	good	very good	excellent

4.4 Things That Are Important For A Successful Crop Production Club

— have a small membership, 10-15 members
— have a formalized operating system including formal meetings that are well run
— have a clearly defined purpose
— have a democratic system for decision making
— make sure the club is member driven
— have access to professional advice and consultation
— restrict membership to the innovative farmer
— have a clear set of operating procedures to clarify expectations
— have technical help for setting up and completing projects
— have a good system for sharing information
— keep good records
— have a social expectation built in to the club

These points were gleaned from the 35 people interviewed in the study.

4.5 Problems with The Study

4.51 It is difficult to define the term "crop production club." The emphasis within any one club will vary from club to club. Any policies or programs relating to crop production clubs must be broad enough to facilitate these differences.

4.52 Crop Production Clubs are relatively new. It must be recognized that the information collected in this study comes from individuals with little experience.

4.53 Crop Production Clubs are project oriented and tend to draw conclusions from limited data often based on one years' experience. There should be some form of encouragement to replicate programs over a number of years to obtain more valid data.

4.54 The study found that clubs consisting of innovative farmers seemed to be the most successful. It is not clear what will prevent these clubs from becoming either "old boys" clubs or "elitest" organizations, both of which could affect their creditability, thus effectiveness in technology transfer.

5. Recommendations From The Study And The Literature Review

5.1 A manual should be produced to assist in the formation of crop clubs.

5.2 A communication system should be set up to allow for exchange of information and ideas among crop clubs.

5.3 Funding should be made available to hire technicians and obtain necessary equipment to assist the club projects.

5.4 The need for a provincial and/or regional crop club conference should be explored to determine if such an activity would be worthwhile.

5.5 A publication listing resource people should be developed to assist crop clubs in obtaining speakers to improve their projects.

5.6 Further studies should be undertaken to determine the impact of crop production clubs on the whole technology transfer process.

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